

Commentary

## Social Navigation and the Refugee Crisis: Traversing “Archipelagos” of Uncertainty

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Submitted: 18 June 2019 | Accepted: 18 June 2019 | Published: 28 June 2019

### Abstract

This reflection considers the thematic issue “Refugee Crises Disclosed: Intersections between Media, Communication and Forced Migration Processes” through the lens of social navigation which takes into account the fluidity and uncertainty of the refugee and forced migrant condition whether in flight, emplaced, or at a temporary stopping point. Refugees who are able to “read” their social environment will be more successful in developing practices to navigate through unpredictable migration processes, including responding to information uncertainty. Yet even as some of the displaced adapt, other actors—particularly those part of the refugee regime—are also operating in unstable conditions such that the actions of refugees/forced migrants may in turn keep the circumstances of those purporting to help also in flux.

### Keywords

belonging; digital environment; information precarity; migrant; refugee; social navigation; uncertainty

### Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Refugee Crises Disclosed: Intersections between Media, Communication and Forced Migration Processes”, edited by Vasiliki Tsagkroni (Leiden University, The Netherlands) and Amanda Alencar (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands).

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This thematic issue on “Refugee Crises Disclosed” provides a window into the constellation of adaptive tactics enacted by refugees and forced migrants as they respond to both “radical and protracted uncertainty” (Horst & Grabska, 2015, p. 1). While 21st century social life in general has been described as insecure, liquid and marked by risk, the ways refugees and forced migrants experience such conditions is further shaped by the reasons for their flight (often violent political or economic conflict) as well as the nature of their movement in terms of sudden, often unplanned dislocation. In response to these uncertainties, refugees deploy practices of social navigation or the ways “people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances...[as] they disentangle themselves from confining structures” (Vigh, 2009, p. 419). The concept of social navigation “directs our attention to both the way people engage in the world and the way they move toward positions they perceive as being better than their current location” and is intended to capture

the flows of actions across ever changing social environments (Vigh, 2009, p. 432). In sum, social navigation consists of dynamic movements carried out by actors “within a moving environment” or what Vigh (2009) calls “motion squared” (p. 420).

A common thread in this special issue’s collection of studies is the documentation of the ways refugees and forced migrants engage in social navigation of displacement. Some refugees enact this navigation using “*visão*” (vision), an ability to read “the wider social environment [with] the poise and cunning required for successful living” (Archambault, 2013, pp. 89–90). We see this in Von Burg’s (2019) consideration of the ongoing landings of refugees on Lampedusa, where those making unsanctioned arrivals must navigate their legal status as they aim for the perceived safety of Europe. As with most refugees, their wayfaring is complicated by the “archipelago” of actors and actants found in the transnational migration process (Triandafyllidou, 2019,

p. 1). Here, refugees' social navigation tactics include determining whether to exert independence as they seek a new future or submit to dependence by placing themselves solely within the care of the refugee system.

Even for those who get off islands both real and metaphoric, their navigation must remain fluid because reaching a destination is never really "final" as dynamic changes in policies, who carries them out and how they do so continue upon arrival at the next depot wherever that may be (Triandafyllidou, 2019; Van Neste-Gottignies & Mistiaen, 2018). As Alencar and Tsagkroni (2019) find, for example, refugees granted asylum in the Netherlands come to understand that navigating new lives in the context of Western Europe is an ongoing process of adaptation and negotiation, one in which they volunteer, visit cultural sites and carry out observations in public spaces as they place themselves into dialogue with their social environment and networks, creating their own trajectories toward the expectations of official integration, which are themselves subject to ever-changing social forces. As refugees move within social environments, those environments are also in motion. Such is also the case of refugees in New Zealand examined by Marlowe (2019) who engage in political activities through transnational networks with goals of remaking the countries they have fled from, and, in taking such action, potentially remaking themselves. Their navigation processes enable them to "develop different forms of agency" unavailable or even unimaginable to them in their pre-exile lives (Triandafyllidou, 2019, p. 6).

Finally, across the various cases presented here, one notable uncertainty of migration consists of "information precarity" (Wall, Otis Campbell, & Janbek, 2017), a condition in which access to information is limited leaving those who experience it "vulnerable to misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors that can affect their economic and social capital" (p. 240). Increasingly, this condition is navigated by refugees in the digital environment (see Alencar, 2018; Dekker, Engbersen, Klaver, & Vonk, 2018; Gillespie, Osseiran, & Cheesman, 2018; Leurs & Smets, 2018; Witteborn, 2015). This issue's scholars demonstrate how refugees challenge information and emotional deprivations by engaging in online spaces that provide a means to enact a present and/or imagine a future of belonging (Marlowe, Bartley, & Collins, 2017). This may encompass political belonging launched from within new homelands such as Marlowe (2019) describes as well as affective belonging to new and old networks as they use social media platforms to elicit emotional support (Kneer, Van Eldik, Jansz, Eischeid, & Usta, 2019), as a strategy to build self-esteem (Van Eldik, Kneer, & Jansz, 2019) or for staying in touch with culture from their homeland (Neag, 2019). Yet for other refugees and migrants the digital space can facilitate violent threats (Gabdulhakov, 2019); in these cases, migrants may use social navigational tactics such as self-protection through silence and isolation. In sum, refugees and forced migrants are constantly negotiating with their

social environments whether online or offline, sometimes creating resistant visions of their futures to liberate themselves from the present. Ultimately, as Horst and Grabska (2015) argue, responding to uncertainty—viewed here through social navigation practice—opens up unexpected new ways of acting in the world.

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to Amanda Alencar and Vasiliki Tsagkroni for shepherding this issue to completion.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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